

Kim Burk

[CB] (Craig Bartett)

Will we see anything between Gerald and Phoebe? And how about Arnold and Helga?

CB: The Gerald/Phoebe thing has been going on for four seasons, but it's pretty low-key. They definitely have a mutual attraction. Maybe it's time to make an episode about it. Arnold and Helga -- that's another story. Since Helga's unrequited love for Arnold is one of the main themes of the show, we'll write tons more episodes about it, but never probably resolve it. We're talking about using it in the movie, but it's too early to tell.

Why does Helga feel she has to cover up her feelings for Arnold by being mean to him?

CB: That's Helga's deal: she's acting out her anger. Her home life sucks. Bob and Miriam ignore her. Compared to Olga, she feels like some kind of graceless little ugly duckling. So she's developed this tough, brittle exterior as the meanest, most cynical kid in the fourth grade. How could she love Arnold, the nicest guy in school? It's her secret: she's got a soft, gooey, poetic, romantic interior. You'd think that a kid as smart and self-aware as Helga would realize that she should just tell Arnold and deal with it, but she still believes that if her secret got out, she'd die of embarrassment. But let's give the girl a break: she's nine. She'll learn someday (but not yet).

Where is Oskar from?

CB: Oskar is from Czechoslovakia. His accent is based on an old boss of mine, Gabor Csupo, the Hungarian of Klasky/Csupo fame. Otherwise, they aren't that much alike; Oskar is a huge loser, and Gabor is fabulously successful.

Do Helga's parents care about anything?

CB: You bet! Big Bob cares about winning, selling tons of beepers, getting rich, football, golf, alien abduction conspiracies, his Lincoln, his Humvee, and Olga's collection of awards. Miriam tries not to care about anything -- she's unrealized potential personified. Miriam's got an interesting past, but doesn't see anything particularly interesting in her future. Bob's such a blowhard, Miriam has lost the will to assert herself. Don't count her out, though. Miriam has a few tricks up her sleeve.

How does Gerald get his hair to stay like that?

CB: He just combs it up. His hair has lots of body. He's quite proud of it, you know.

Why does Ruth always seem to appear near the 4th graders when she's a 6th grader?

CB: You see Ruth around a lot because she used to be the object of Arnold's desire, and Arnold is like a magnet. In the "Hey Arnold!" universe, everything secretly orbits around him. Even though he's over her, she still can be seen in the background.

What is Arnold's Grandma's name?

CB: Her name is Gertrude, but no one calls her that. As a kid, she went by "Gertie." Grandpa calls her "Pookie." Everyone else calls her Grandma.

Is the city in which the show takes place meant to be in the Pacific Northwest?

CB: Yep. I try not to be specific, since it's an amalgam of large northern cities I have loved, including Seattle (my hometown), Portland (where I went to art school) and Brooklyn (the bridge, the brownstones, the subway). It's a fictitious, unnamed city.

Nickelodeon has mentioned before that Helga's right fist is given the name The Five Avengers, but it's never been mentioned before in the show. Is that really her fist's name?

CB: What a great trivia question. Helga mentions and names her fists in the script for "Downtown as Fruits," written by me, Joe Ansolabehere, and Steve Viksten, the first episode of the series. The person at Nick who wrote bios of the characters for Nick Online must have read it. However, by the time the episode was made, the reference to the Five Avengers was cut, and only "Old Betsy" (the other fist) remained. The joke was definitely Joe Ansolabehere's. Joe went on to create "Disney's Recess" with Paul Germain, and I notice that their "Helga," a girl named Spinelli, constantly refers to her fists and has names for them... Joe must have an obsession with naming your fists.

Will Arnold EVER find out Helga's "secret"? (and if so...will that be the end of the series or be part of the movie?)

CB: Back to Helga's secret... I really don't want Arnold to ever figure it out, for two reasons. One: the series would probably have to end. Two: it's my theory that at age nine, boys don't really have a clue about love stuff. Girls are miles ahead of them, really into romance, relationships, intrigue, while boys are still running in packs, playing with legos. So I try to keep Arnold innocent. Believe me, it's challenging. (Hey Arnold! That's Helga disguised as Cecile, you dolt!!!) Yes, we're trying to decide to make Helga's telling her secret a part of the movie.

And of course, the most frequently asked question: Will Arnold's last name ever be revealed?

CB: Nickelodeon wants us to make an episode that reveals his last name, but to me it would be an anticlimax: how can you make an entire episode about a kid's last name? Maybe in the final episode...

How long does it usually take to make one episode? How does the process go?

CB: From the story idea to the finished half-hour delivered to Nickelodeon, about nine months. Of course, we make 20 half-hours a year, so they overlap like crazy. I've always got about twenty stories in some kind of shape that I work on a little bit every day. I work the most on the beginning and the end of the process: story premise, script, recording the actors, cutting the dialog tracks, then on the other end cutting the animated film, spotting the music with Jim Lang the composer, mixing the shows with the sound editors. In between, there are tons of meetings with the artists who draw the show, from character design to background layout and storyboard.

What is it like behind the scenes? Do you guys goof off a lot?

CB: It's way more fun here now that Nick built us a new studio in Burbank. We've been here since February, and it's like PeeWee's Playhouse in here. Yes, we do have a miniature golf course, but the "Hey Arnold!" crew doesn't golf much. We're too busy working. The "Oh Yeah!" crew golfs a lot. I don't goof off much. I wake up every morning and actually want to go straight to work. There's just so much to do. I know that sounds boring, but it isn't. When I get too strung out, I take a week and go on vacation.

Do you get to meet a lot of celebrities from working on the show?

CB: Some. I love the recording process, it's the moment when the show really comes alive for me. My favorite moments have been with Jim Belushi and Cathy Moriarty (Coach Wittenberg and Tish), Ron Perlman (Mickey Kaline), Randy Travis (the singing Mr. Hyunh), but I really have to say that I love the regular cast. I think they are incredible. Franny and the other kids, all the Patakis, Dan Castellaneta's Grandpa... these are fantastic actors.

In one of the third season's episodes, the credits included "Special Thanks to Matt Groening." How has Matt helped out "Hey Arnold"?

CB: Matt is my brother-in-law (I'm married to his sister Lisa). He has been a real mentor to me -- gave us good advice on our pilot script, and since then has provided much moral support as I went through my painful beginnings. We commiserate on the phone. I started the "special thanks" card on the credits late in third season, and Matt was my first "special thanks."

How did Arnold come to be? Why did you decide to give him a football-shaped head?

CB: I created Arnold when I first moved to LA, ten years ago. I was still doing clay animation on glass (the Penny cartoons from PeeWee's Playhouse) so I designed him out of clay. I cut out the football shape from a big sheet of clay, set the eyes wide apart, gave him the huge hair and tiny hat, and that was that.

Who's your favorite character in "Hey Arnold!"?

CB: I love Grandpa. He's what I want to be like when I'm old. He doesn't give a hoot what people think, he's a real straight talker, and he knows how to have fun. I think Dan Castellaneta's vocal performance is another reason why I love him. I also love Helga, cause she's got so many layers. She's the most complicated character I've ever created. I have a lot of favorites.

Are any of the characters based directly on yourself?

CB: I'm Arnold. He's the spiritual center of the show, and so I look deep inside myself to see what Arnold would think was right or wrong. There's a lot of ways we differ... I don't have a football-shaped head, I didn't grow up under a freeway overpass, and I actually have parents. Also, Nocturnal Ned or Nashville Ned (the DJ) is drawn to look like me.

What is your favorite episode, and why?

CB: I have lots of favorites! I love the three specials we made this year: "School Play," in which Arnold and Helga kiss, "Arnold's Thanksgiving," maybe the darkest story we've ever done, and "Parents Day," the show that reveals so much about the people that make the show, it's almost embarrassing. It's us at our most vulnerable and sentimental. But hopefully it's funny too. Other favorites: "Arnold's Hat," because the whole Arnold Universe is spelled out, "Pigeon Man," because it's a great example of the show's magic realism, "Helga Blabs it All" and "Helga's Love Potion," two stories of mine that continue Helga's secret, "What's Opera, Arnold?" cause I wrote the songs, "Mr. Hyunh Goes Country" and "Road Trip" for the same reason, "Cool Party," because it's a reunion show of all the kid actors that have ever worked on the series.

Did you spend a lot of your life in the city?

CB: Yes, especially the second half of my life. As an art student I used to walk around old brick warehouse neighborhoods and take pictures, and that influenced "Hey Arnold!"

When did you start drawing? Did you get a lot of compliments on your artwork as a kid?

CB: As long as I can remember, age three I think. My parents and grandparents were very supportive, gave me pencils and pads every Christmas and birthday. In grade school I was the "Class Artist," the one who would get asked to "draw me a picture of something." So I got a lot of support, and expected to grow up to be an artist.

What did you do after high school?

CB: I went to Art School in Portland, then to Siena Italy, for a year, then back to the northwest to finish college at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. The whole process was very rambling and had a lot of detours. It took me seven years to graduate from someplace, but was a healthy mix of travel, school, and work. I saw a lot of art and had a lot of life experiences. For a while, I thought that travel was the most important thing I could do.

How far have you guys gone as far as the movie goes? Have you figured out what it's going to be about, or when you think it'll be finished?

CB: Steve Viksten and I are busy writing the movie, and also a direct to video feature, so that makes two feature-length projects, as well as the regular season, which is forty eleven-minute stories. Yeeesh! We still aren't ready to say what the

movie will be about. Stay tuned! We figure to have it ready for theaters in 2001, so there's plenty of time.

How long do you expect Hey Arnold to run? Do you think that it will continue after four seasons, which is when most Nicktoons stop?

CB: We're waiting for Nickelodeon to pick us up for 81-100, a fifth season. After 100, who knows? We'll probably be busy making our two features, and maybe some specials that would run on TV and set up the movies... we'll stay busy for years yet, even with no more planned than that. I bet the whole "Arnold" thing will end up meaning eight to ten years work for me and the gang.

What do you plan on doing after "Hey Arnold!"?

CB: I want to create a mythology series, and I'm interested in doing more of the work digitally, on computers. It's a control thing. I have several ideas for more shows, and so do some of my co-workers, and I'd like to help them get their projects off the ground if I can.

What advice would you give to an aspiring cartoonist?

CB: Draw, and draw, and draw. Fill up those empty notebooks with drawings. Draw from life. Observe the human condition and comment on it. Eventually you will find what it is that you have to say. Because it's all story-telling, one way or another. Become a good story teller. Some old animator once said that we all have a million bad drawings in us - we're supposed to draw our first million bad ones as fast as we can, so we can get to the good ones. I think I'm somewhere around 900,000, so I better keep drawing. See ya.